Laos Outlay Curb Hit by Pentagon

Associated Press

The Pentagon has told the Senate a proposed $200 million ceiling on U.S. spending in Laos is unworkable because officials don't know exactly how much American money is being spent there.

A Defense Department memorandum said that because of the combat situation, the Pentagon has been unable to maintain nation-by-nation records of U.S. spending in Southeast Asia.

Sen. Stuart Symington, D-Mo., sponsor of the amendment that would impose the ceiling, said, "This admission strikes me as a strong argument for its adoption."

Symington said that if the administration doesn't know how much is being spent in each country, he doesn't see how it can be certain it is abiding by a $2.5 billion congressional limit on expenditures for military assistance of all Southeast Asia.

The Missouri senator was reported to have said at a secret Senate session June 7 that U.S. involvement in Laos is costing more than $374 million a year, including aid to the government and to Lao, thai and irregular forces fighting Communists in the northern part of the country.

Symington expressed concern at U.S. B52 bombing raids over northern Laos. His amendment would exempt from the proposed ceiling the cost of U.S. air raids over the Ho Chi Minh Trail area of southern Laos, on the border with South Vietnam.

In a memo to the Senate Armed Services Committee, the Pentagon declared its opposition to the spending limit, defended the policy of military support for Laos, and said, "as drafted, the amendment cannot be administered by the executive branch."

The Pentagon said that for five years, with concurrence of congressional committees, its records of military assistance funded by the armed services in Southeast Asia have been kept only on an estimated basis becuase of demands of combat.

The Pentagon said the amendment "would substantially impair our outgoing operations in Laos, operations which have been usdertaken at the request of the government of Laos to assist it is resisting military takeover by North Vietnam."